

# Once secret was out, Tory MPs were soon chanting ‘5 more years’

By Gordon Rayner, POLITICAL EDITOR

IT IS a romantic and seductive story: a Prime Minister, out walking in Snowdonia, who is inspired to a moment of epiphany by the majesty of the scenery around her.

That was Theresa May's explanation of how she reached her momentous decision to hold a snap general election, but the truth is rather more prosaic, though equally fascinating.

Although she took almost the entire Cabinet completely by surprise when she told them about the June 8 poll yesterday morning, her closest advisers had known for almost a week, and had been preparing for the news for the past fortnight.

The fact that no-one in Westminster had an inkling of what they were up to is a rare achievement, made possible by the intimacy of her inner circle. Initially, the only people who knew her thinking were her joint chiefs of staff Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill, as well as her closest confidant of all, her husband Philip.

Mrs May had started talking to them about an early election almost as soon as she triggered Article 50 at the end of

last month, and went to Wales already minded to go to the polls.

Insiders say she had been taken aback by the sheer scale of the opposition to her Brexit plans – Jeremy Corbyn made it clear that Labour would vote against the final deal in 2019 if it did not meet a set of arbitrary tests, while the Lib Dems talked of “grinding the Government agenda to a standstill” and the SNP said they had “no intention” of backing the Great Repeal Bill.

As Mrs May told ITV's Robert Peston yesterday: “The potential attempts to jeopardise or frustrate the process in the future became clearer.”

The Prime Minister was surrounded by voices urging her to go to the polls, including William Hague, the former Tory leader, who wrote in this newspaper last month about the “troubles ahead” and the need for the PM to increase her majority ahead of the perilous vote in 2019 to get the Brexit deal through Parliament.

Several senior Cabinet ministers shared that view. They pointed out that Mrs May had a brief window of opportunity for an early election, as Brexit talks will be stuck in the slow lane until France and Germany have held their



Inspired: Theresa and Philip May in Wales. Below, the Downing Street announcement

own general elections between now and September.

Gradually and, as she said in her statement outside Downing Street “reluctantly”, Mrs May began to come around to their way of thinking.

Opinion polls suggested she would win a landslide in a general election, and Mrs May only had to think back as far as Gordon Brown for a prime minis-

ter who faced a similar chance to increase their majority, only to hesitate and live to regret it.

Whitehall sources also said the “rhetoric” Mrs May faced in EU council meetings made her increasingly convinced that she would struggle to secure a good deal for Britain as long as EU leaders knew she might struggle to get her own plans through Parliament.

Amber Rudd, the Home Secretary, said yesterday: “The point is with the EU they will know we have a small majority. They will watch the polls, see the debates, they read the newspapers. “It's important for the EU to realise we have a strong government that is supported by the country so that we can get the best negotiation with them.”

There was, of course, a problem. Ever since she was chosen as Conservative leader – and hence Prime Minister – last July, Mrs May has been steadfast and unswerving on the question of an early election.

“I'm not going to be calling a snap election”, she said shortly after taking office. “I've been very clear that I think we need that period of time, that stability – to be able to deal with the issues that the country is facing and have that

election in 2020.” She explained that “division in Westminster will risk our ability to make a success of Brexit”, and repeated the message whenever she was asked.

Having already been stung by the experience of the spring Budget, when she was forced to scrap plans for an increase in National Insurance because it broke a manifesto pledge, Mrs May was wary of another about-turn.

During her walks in Snowdonia she discussed the dilemma with her hus-

band Philip, and between them they came to the conclusion that an election was not only in the country's interests, but overrode any sniping Mrs May might have to endure about a U-turn.

Writing in today's *Daily Telegraph*, Mrs May insists: “It is not a decision that I have reached lightly.”

She adds: “The choice [between the parties] is clear-cut, but the decision to call this election was anything but.”

Last Wednesday, when she got back from Wales, the Prime Minister gath-

ered her closest Downing Street advisers around her and told them her mind was made up.

Key party figures were told on a need-to-know basis, but still only a handful of people outside Number 10 were in on the secret. One senior minister who was told of the plan said: “Every time I went to bed and woke up to hear North Korea as the headline on the radio I was delighted.”

Those in the know did not include most of the Cabinet, such as David Da-

vis, the Brexit Secretary, who until late on Monday night was still arranging meetings with EU ministers for an intended trip to Bucharest which was due to happen today.

Instead of visiting Romania, Mr Davis will instead be among MPs voting on whether to override the Fixed Term Parliaments Act and agree to an election in June.

While Mr Davis was finalising his travel arrangements on Monday, Mrs May was on the phone to Buckingham Palace to tell the Queen of her plans for an election.

It was, in effect, a courtesy call, because where previous Prime Ministers would have asked the Queen to dissolve Parliament when they decided to hold an election, Mrs May will be asking Parliament to approve the election instead.

At 9.30am yesterday, Mrs May sat down in her seat at the Cabinet table and, without ceremony, told ministers she had decided to hold a snap election on June 8.

According to one person who was in the room: “It's fair to say that there was some surprise that it had been so quietly done. There was praise that it had

been so quietly done. Everyone had their say. Everyone spoke. It was a sober meeting, there was no banging on the table or anything like that.”

“There was total agreement that this was the right thing to do. Sir Patrick McLoughlin [the Tory chairman] made clear that this was one of the most difficult decisions any PM could take but it was the right one.”

“There was also discussion of how

*‘Key party figures were told on a need-to-know basis, but only a handful outside No10 were in on the secret’*

we mustn't become complacent because of the opinion polls putting us so far ahead.”

As soon as the Cabinet meeting had finished, Mrs May stepped out of the famous door of Number 10 to share her secret with the world.

As she had promised to do in an interview with *US Vogue*, the Prime Minister ditched her favourite tartan Vivienne Westwood trouser suit – her “go-to” outfit for major announce-

ments – in favour of a new look, a pinstriped navy blue dress by Daniel Blake. As she had done in Cabinet, she got straight to the point.

“I have just chaired a meeting of the Cabinet, where we agreed that the Government should call a general election, to be held on June 8”, she said.

Asked by the Liberal Democrats were taken by surprise but insisted they would be ready, and Diane Abbott, shadow home secretary, rather optimistically suggested Jeremy Corbyn could be the next prime minister.

At a meeting of the 1922 Committee of Conservative backbench MPs last night, Mrs May made a speech to a room packed with more than 200 people in which she told them to focus on the party's record in Government when they are campaigning, and not on the weakness of Labour. She did not allow any questions.

As the meeting broke up Conservative MPs banged on the tables and belated their approval, chanting “five more years!”

By *The Daily Telegraph* how the meeting went as she left, Mrs May pointed over her shoulder and said: “Listen to that!”



**The lady is finally for turning**  
May kept ruling out a snap poll

June 30, 2016 as she declared her candidacy for the Tory leadership, Mrs May said: “There should be no general election until 2020.”

Sept 4 Mrs May told Andrew Marr that the country needed stability and that calling an election would jeopardise that. She said: “I'm not going to be calling a snap election.”

Oct 2 Mrs May ruled out an early election on the grounds that an early vote would cause “instability”.

March 7 A No 10 source said: “It's not going to happen. It's not something she plans to do or wishes to do.”

March 20 Mrs May's official spokesman said: “There is no change in our position on an early general election, that there isn't going to be one... It is not going to happen.”

## Her eyes glittered like ice. She was launching a coldly furious attack

### Sketch



By Michael Deacon

Theresa May said she'd made her decision “with reluctance”. It was hard to believe. She looked about as reluctant as a pitbull sniffing a pork chop.

When it was announced that the Prime Minister would be making a statement outside 10 Downing Street, Westminster was beside itself. In the past, Mrs May had insisted there would be no election before 2020. So could her stance be about Scotland? Northern Ireland? Surely she wasn't about to resign?

Into Downing Street the media swarmed. Overhead, helicopters thundered.

Tension gnawed the air. Then, at five past 11, the Prime Minister emerged. Instant silence.

Reaching her lectern, she looked from side to side, took a breath, and then began. Yes, she wanted a general election – to be held on June 8. Less than two months away.

At first, her manner was calm, measured, even matter-of-fact. But then, as she explained why she wanted an election, it unmistakably changed. Her brow darkened. Her voice hardened. The temperature seemed to drop 20 degrees.

It was all, she made clear, about Brexit – and the difference between its success, and its failure. “At this moment of enormous national significance, there should be unity here in Westminster”, she growled. “But instead there is division. The country is coming together. But Westminster is not.” Her eyes glittered like ice. She wasn't merely announcing an election. She was launching a coldly furious political attack.

Labour, the Lib Dems, the SNP, “unelected Lords” – all of them, glowered Mrs May, were hampering the chances of a successful Brexit. They and their “game-playing” could “grind the business of government to a standstill”, “jeopardise the work we must do”, “weaken the Government's negotiating position”.

They could even (she did not specify how) “endanger the security of millions of working people”. As a result, an election was essential.

Indeed, more than that: a thumping Tory win was essential. Essential to prevent rival parties flogging Brexit. Essential to strengthen Mrs May's hand in her negotiations with the EU. Essential to “secure the strong and stable leadership the country needs to see us through Brexit”.

She could hardly have been more blunt. Brexit would only be a success if the Tories won handsomely on June 8. The alternative was “a weak and unstable coalition government” – giving power to MPs who longed to stop Brexit altogether.

She called her announcement “a challenge to the opposition parties”. Yet it also felt like a challenge to the public. Or even a threat. Vote Tory – or on your own head be it. You – not just Labour, the Lib Dems, the SNP and the traitorous Lords, but you, the ordinary voter – will have undermined the Brexit negotiations, and put the future prosperity of the nation at risk. Be warned.

After eight minutes, she brought this startling performance to a halt. “Thank you”, she muttered, and strode back into Number 10.

She had thrown down the gauntlet. Not just to her opponents – but to us all.

Throughout Westminster, MPs from other parties found themselves besieged by microphones. Diane Abbott, the shadow home secretary, informed Sky News that on June 9 Jeremy Corbyn would be prime minister. “Even as I speak”, she proclaimed, “Labour is uniting.” This came as news to Paul Abbott, political correspondent for ITV. At that very moment, he

reported, backbench Labour MPs were meeting in secret – behind Ms Abbott's back.

What a meeting that must have been. Imagine the mood. On the one hand, relief – election defeat would surely end Mr Corbyn's leadership. On the other hand, despair – it would see many of them out of a job, too. And in the meantime, how on earth were they supposed to campaign? Nine months earlier, four-fifths of them had demanded Mr Corbyn step down. What were they going to say to voters now? “We think Jeremy Corbyn is useless. Make him prime minister!”

Two Labour MPs – Alan Johnson (Hull West & Hesse) and Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South & East Cleveland) – hit on a way to avoid that problem. They announced that they wouldn't be standing.

For his part, Mr Corbyn sounded unusually cheerful. “I'm looking forward to it!” he beamed. He had the air of a prisoner offered parole.

Today, MPs will vote for the election to go ahead. Then, in just seven weeks, Mrs May should have a resounding mandate for her Brexit plan.

Unless, of course, the will of the people is defied by the people.

*‘At this moment of enormous national significance, the country is coming together. But Westminster is not’*

## ‘A necessary election to secure strong leadership’

Theresa May

The Prime Minister believes that going to the country will bring the nation the stability it needs

Yesterday, I announced my decision to hold a general election on Thursday, June 8 in order to secure the strong and stable leadership the country needs to see us through Brexit and beyond.

I welcome the fact that the other parties have indicated they will support that decision in the House of Commons today.

It is not a decision that I have reached lightly. The priority when I became Prime Minister was to provide the country with stability after the long and passionately fought referendum campaign.

But having delivered that and having reflected long and hard about the task ahead, I believe it is in Britain's national interest to have a general election now.

It is the only way to provide the certainty and stability the country needs over the long-term – not just up to the moment that we leave the European Union, but for a full five years.

And it is the best way to strengthen Britain's hand in the negotiations ahead.

Securing the right deal for Britain is my priority, but the divisions in Westminster, and the Government's small majority, risk undermining our position as the negotiations go on.

For while the country is increasingly united, Westminster remains divided.

The opposition parties believe – wrongly – that, because the Government's majority is so small, our resolve will weaken and they can force us to change course.

In the weeks since the Government triggered Article 50, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and the SNP have all said they want to try to block

*‘While the country is increasingly united, Westminster remains divided, jeopardising the work we must do to prepare for Brexit’*

the Government's plan for Brexit. And unelected members of the House of Lords have vowed to fight the Government every step of the way.

The sole result of this approach is to jeopardise the work we must do to prepare for Brexit and to weaken our hand in the negotiations to come. It is time to bring this uncertainty to an end. A general election in June is the way to do it.

The alternative – to wait until 2020 – would cause increased uncertainty and instability at a crucial time, because the negotiations would reach their most difficult and sensitive stage with an election on the horizon.

The inevitable political divisions this would cause in Westminster and elsewhere would risk our ability to make a success of Brexit. It would cause uncertainty and instability just at the moment the country should be preparing to seize the opportunities that lie ahead.

An election now removes this uncertainty and provides the country with five years of strong and stable leadership to see us through the negotiations and beyond.

*‘Our plan is to get the right deal for Britain abroad and a better deal for ordinary, working people at home. It will be a positive, optimistic campaign that seeks to bring the country together’*

That is crucial because, as I have often said, we should be judged not on how we decided to leave the European Union, but by what we make of that decision too.

That is why the Government has set out a Plan for a Stronger Britain. A plan that will establish Britain as the strongest country in Europe in economic growth and national security, build a stronger economy, provide real opportunity for all and build a more secure and united nation.

It is a plan to get the right deal for Britain abroad and a better deal for ordinary, working people at home, and I am determined that we will continue to deliver on it so that we build a more secure future for our country.

That is what I will be campaigning on in the weeks to come. It will be a positive, optimistic campaign that seeks to bring the country together around my vision of a stronger, more secure Britain.

Fundamentally, it will come down to a choice about leadership. The strong and stable leadership in the national interest provided by the

Conservatives, or a weak and unstable coalition of Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the SNP.

I will be asking for the public's support to continue to deliver my Plan for a Stronger Britain, to lead the country through the next five years and to give the Government the certainty and stability we all need.

The choice is clear cut, but the decision to call this election was anything but. It was with some reluctance that I decided the country needed this election.

Yet it is with strong conviction that I say it is necessary. It is necessary to secure the strong and stable leadership that the country needs in order to see us through Brexit and beyond, to strengthen Britain's hand in the negotiations to come, and to ensure we can continue to deliver our Plan for a Stronger Britain.

Let us vote for this election and put the choice in the hands of the people. I am confident they will choose to support the strong and stable leadership Britain needs so that we may build a more secure future for our country and a better deal for all.

## May seeks to make historic gains in Labour heartlands

Continued from Page 1 Donald Tusk, and Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission.

Mrs May told opposition parties: “This is your moment to show you mean it, to show you are not opposing the Government for the sake of it, to show that you do not treat politics as a game.”

Mrs May will seek to make historic gains in the North and the Midlands, aggressively going after Labour in their heartlands by appealing to Brexit supporters who voted Labour in the last election.

She said: “The decision facing the country will be all about leadership. It will be a choice between strong and stable leadership in the national interest, led by my Prime Minister, or weak and unstable coalition government, led by Jeremy Corbyn, propped up by the Liberal Democrats – who want to reopen the divisions of the referendum – and Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP.”

“Every vote for the Conservatives will make it harder for opposition politicians who want to stop me from getting the job done. Every vote for the Conservatives will make me stronger when I negotiate for Britain with the prime ministers, presidents and chancellors of the European Union.”

Some Labour MPs, including Alan Johnson, the former home secretary, responded to the news by saying

### 25

The minimum number of working days required before an election date in order to allow all parties time to campaign

they would step down at the next election.

Meanwhile, John Woodcock, the Labour MP for Barrow-in-Furness, told constituents that while he would be standing again, he “will not countenance ever voting to make Jeremy Corbyn Britain's prime minister”.

Opponents of Mr Corbyn admitted they could not remove him before the election because of Labour's complex rules on choosing a new leader.

### Commentary



By Rosa Prince

For a politician whose watchword is caution, Theresa May is not afraid to take a gamble. She sure can keep a secret, too.

Our most enigmatic Prime Minister relishes confounding her staid reputation by sallying forth in bright colours, leather and eccentric footwear. In announcing a shockingly unexpected general election, she has shown it is not just in her fashion choices that she can be bold.

But for Mrs May, there is no contradiction between caution and risk. During her time as home secretary, she infuriated officials at times with her agonisingly slow decision-making. Once the facts were assembled, however, they learnt she was more than prepared to make brave moves, off-piste responses that might have been unexpected but were never ill-considered.

Before the Election that Will Be (in contrast to Gordon Brown's 2007 Election that Never Was), perhaps the quintessential example of Mrs May's capacity to electrify Westminster with cautious boldness was her 2012 order to block the extradition to the US of the computer hacker Gary McKinnon.

Her civil servants had asked for her decision within weeks of her appointment as home secretary. She took two-and-a-half-years. Defying the Obama administration upended the norms of the Special Relationship – a wildly unorthodox move that stunned the then prime minister, David Cameron, and his Cabinet, whom she spectacularly failed to consult.

It also proved overwhelmingly popular with the British public and, once made, seemed utterly logical, for all its unexpectedness.

The modus operandi that allowed Mrs May to survive the graveyard of political careers that is the Home Office has now been transplanted to Number 10.

As with the McKinnon decision, she will have discussed the prospect of an early election with no one but a tiny coterie of trusted advisers, including her two consiglieri, Fiona Hill and Nick Timothy, and her husband,

Philip, whose down-to-earth advice she prizes above all others’.

So tight is this inner circle that not a whisper of the prime minister's decision to hold a general election escaped Number 10 before her big announcement, to the extent that the most seasoned Westminster watchers were unsure what she

*‘It is, above all, the shattered state of the Labour Party that has made up Mrs May's mind for her’*

would say until she opened her mouth.

What a contrast to Gordon Brown, another prime minister with a reputation for caution, who, when confronted with a similar choice of whether to take advantage of favourable polls to go to the country early, allowed rampant speculation among his loose-lipped advisers.

Where Mrs May has displayed considerable boldness, Mr Brown's decision not to call an election nearly a decade ago was an example of dithering timidity from which his

party has never recovered. It is, above all, the shattered state of the Labour Party under Mr Brown's successor – but one, and polls that indicate a return to Tory majority, which have made up Mrs May's mind for her.

The overwhelming logic of calling the election now, when all the stars are aligned, rather than waiting three more years, two of which will be consumed by Brexit, is such that it begs the question why it took her so long to come around to the idea.

For the answer, we must examine her biography. As a child of the vicarage, it sticks in the craw for Mrs May to break a promise, not so much to her media interrogators as the electorate at large. Having pledged at the outset of her premiership to reign until 2020, she was minded to keep her word.

But with the polls last weekend so favourable they might have put mettle into Mr Brown were he in her – leopard-print – shoes, the temptation to pursue a majority most prime ministers could only dream of was too much, even for the vicar's daughter.

Rosa Prince is the author of ‘Theresa May: The Enigmatic Prime Minister’